

Washington - Congresswoman Linda Sánchez, Chairwoman of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Commercial and Administrative Law, issued the following statement as part of the House Judiciary Committee's oversight hearing with Attorney General Alberto Gonzales regarding the Bush Administration's mass firing of U.S. Attorneys:

The House Judiciary Committee started this investigation of the mass firing of U.S. Attorneys because of the prospect that partisan politics had contaminated our system of justice.

Over the last two months, we have unfortunately seen numerous signs that U.S. Attorneys and other Justice Department officials may have been hired and fired for the simple purpose of giving a political party an electoral advantage.

I simply cannot overstate how dangerous a threat this is. Partisanship in our justice system is a cancer — it threatens our very democracy and system of laws.

Of course, the President has a right to dismiss political appointees, including U.S. Attorneys. However, neither the President nor his designees have the right to remove them in order to interfere with ongoing investigations or to retaliate against a U.S. Attorney for not prosecuting cases that would benefit a particular political party. Removing a U.S. Attorney for refusing to make a prosecutorial decision for political reasons would represent a serious threat to the very notions of fairness on which our justice system rests. Politics should not be injected into decisions to bring the full force of the law against an individual.

Simply put, the American people need to know that political calculations do not determine whether an individual is arrested or prosecuted.

That is why we need to get to the truth on two central questions: Who made the decision to mass fire U.S. Attorneys, and why were these particular U.S. Attorneys targeted?

To date, we still have not gotten clear and credible answers to our questions.

For example, two high-level Department of Justice officials have testified before the Subcommittee on Commercial and Administrative Law about six of the eight U.S. Attorneys who were recently fired. Members of the Subcommittee received starkly different accounts as to why an unprecedented number of U.S. Attorneys were fired mid-term, without cause, and without explanation.

First, on March 6, 2007, William E. Moschella, the Principal Associate Deputy Attorney General, testified that the U.S. Attorneys were removed for "performance-related reasons" and provided specific rationales justifying each dismissal.

On May 3, 2007, former Deputy Attorney General James B. Comey, whose job for more than two years included supervising all 93 U.S. Attorneys, testified that he was very familiar with several of the prosecutors who were eventually fired and praised the work of U.S. Attorneys

Daniel Bogden, Paul Charlton, David Iglesias, Carol Lam, and John McKay. Mr. Comey's testimony seriously questioned whether the rationales put forth by Mr. Moschella were the actual reasons for the dismissals.

We have learned that the Bush Administration exploited a newly created loophole in the PATRIOT Act to purge high-performing federal prosecutors while they were in the midst of high-profile public corruption investigations involving Republican officials. While the Administration has insisted it never intended to use this loophole to bypass Senate confirmation for appointing U.S. Attorneys, our investigation has uncovered communications and testimony that suggest otherwise.

We have learned that U.S. Attorneys were rated on a removal list based in large part on whether they were "loyal Bushies." However, after numerous interviews with Justice Department officials, limited access to Department documents, and no access to White House officials or documents, it is still unclear who within the Administration was responsible for placing those particular U.S. Attorneys on the list.

Unfortunately, the Attorney General's prepared testimony does not seem to shed any additional light on the issue. The Attorney General acknowledges that U.S. Attorneys should not be replaced "in order to impede or speed along particular criminal investigations." While the Attorney General indicates that he has "no basis to believe that anyone involved in this process sought the removal of a U.S. Attorney for an improper reason," he has consistently stated that he did not have specific knowledge about how or why these U.S. Attorneys got on the firing list.

If he has no knowledge of how or why these eight U.S. Attorneys were selected for firing, on what basis can he assure us that they were not fired for an improper reason?

His assurance that no U.S. Attorney was fired for an improper reason rings hollow, which may bring us to a turning point.

The House Judiciary Committee has talked to almost every current and former senior Justice Department official who was or at least should have been involved with any decision to fire federal prosecutors. Not one has been able to recall or take responsibility for how and why these U.S. Attorneys were added to the firing list.

Unless the Attorney General finally provides some clear and credible answers, it looks like we'll have to shift our focus outside the Department. It appears increasingly clear that the truth can only be found in the White House.

It is my hope that in his testimony today, the Attorney General will clarify the true rationales for the firings and pledge the Justice Department's full cooperation with our investigation.

I also hope that in light of this controversy surrounding U.S. Attorneys, the Attorney General will take significant steps toward depoliticizing the Department of Justice. We have heard from

current and former Justice Department employees that morale in the Department is at its lowest point in generations, while politicization is at its peak. Far-reaching steps need to be taken to restore the integrity and prestige of the Justice Department.

Today's hearing will give us some indication whether the current Attorney General is up to that task.